Isolation and Intimacy Processes in Young Adult College Students: A Four Dimensional Model

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Betty Scott Blackwell, and my sister, Dr. Susan Scott.

Mom, it is my strong belief that each and every one of us has a fundamental desire, and that is to love and be loved. Thank you, Mom, that I know you love me. You have given me a profound gift in your love.

Susan, I have always admired you: a pediatrician, neonatologist, endocrinologist…and a Juris Doctor! You blazed a trial before me. You demonstrated to me what one deeply committed and determined woman could contribute to the world. This dissertation is my contribution.

I love you both.

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Abstract

The development of intimate relationships (especially during young adulthood) is a major concern to researchers, practitioners, and educators alike. The ways that we have studied and made sense of this phenomenon have evolved considerably – and continue to evolve over time. The study presented here sought to gain deeper understanding into the processes of developing romantic unions during this formative phase. Data consisted of 20 in-depth autobiographical papers written by students enrolled in a course focusing on intimate relationships at a large Midwestern University. A theory-guided, structured deductive content analysis produced five major findings: (1) isolation and intimacy are separate and concomitant processes; (2) there are four dimensions in the young adulthood stage: dystonic isolation (DIS), syntonic isolation (SIS), dystonic intimacy (DIN), and syntonic intimacy (SIN); (3) a pattern of pairing dimensions, (4) a pattern of seeking adaptive balance from one dimension to another dimension; and (5) a pattern of seeking adaptive balance among all dimensions. The greatest amount of narrative was written about experiences of dystonic intimacy, followed by depictions of the psychosocial process of moving from dystonic isolation to syntonic isolation. The manners in which these findings can inform the development of an assessment tool that purposefully evaluates these four dimensions, implications for clinicians working with young adults, and directions for educators who teach about intimacy are addressed in the discussion.

Keywords: college students, psychosocial development, intimacy, isolation, personal narrative, romantic relationship development, university students, young adulthood

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List of Definitions

Isolation	In the current study, a new definition of isolation is called for wherein isolation is viewed as both dystonic (i.e. feeling bad and functioning poorly) and as syntonic (i.e. feeling good and functioning well) in interactions with romantic others in the young adulthood stage
Intimacy	Historically, according to the Eriksonian view, intimacy was viewed as syntonic (i.e., feeling good and functioning well in romantic, intimate relationships). The view of the current study is that intimacy can be viewed as both dystonic (i.e., feeling bad and functioning poorly when in a romantic intimate relationship) as well has the long referenced syntonic intimacy.
Adaptive balance	In the young adulthood stage, the context for adaptive balance is the development of intimate relationships. As young adults may encounter numerous potential romantic others, and interact directly with several romantic others, adaptive balance is viewed as always in flux, potentially adapting to different romantic others, as well as varying social, contextual changes, requiring adaptation with the social world.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Traditional college students are in an optimal stage for the development of intimate relationships: young adulthood. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory (1950a; 1950b; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986), the central psychosocial task in young adulthood is the development of romantic intimate relationships.

Erikson posited that human development occurs over the life span through eight ordered and predictable stages, each of which builds upon the previous and contains a central task to be negotiated and resolved satisfactorily in order for the individual to progress developmentally (1950a; 1950b). Erikson broke with Freud by his insistence that psychosocial development occurred through an individual's interactions with the social world, positing that social influences carried more weight in the human developmental process than did intrinsic development alone Erikson's model was considered epigenetic in its focus upon development that occurred over time and in predictable stages.

In Erikson's last major work, *Vital Involvement in Old Age* (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986), this developmental process was further clarified and described as an attempt to achieve balance between the major poles in each of the eight stages, and not an "either/or" process of development in each stage (e.g., trust vs. mistrust). Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick (1986) introduced the notion of *dynamic balance of opposites*, ending the Eriksonian notion of "vs." and being replaced by the Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick notion of "and" when discussing the tasks in each of the eight stages. Later

commentary by Waterman (2012) depicted development in each stage as achieving a ratio between two poles. He described one pole was as *syntonic*, "it makes us feel good; it is what we would like to experience" (Waterman, 2012, p. 547). The other pole was then described by Waterman as *dystonic*, "it is associated with functioning poorly, feeling bad; it is something we would wish to avoid" (2012, p. 547). From the Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick view (1986), the major developmental task in the stage of young adulthood involved seeking balance between the poles of *intimacy and isolation* in the development of intimate relationships. Furthermore, according to Waterman (2012), measurement of this process would best be depicted in a ratio between the two poles.

This study's theoretical framework builds upon, expands, and reconceptualizes Erikson's original psychosocial model by seeking to better understand the proposed psychosocial task of young adulthood; that is, the process to seek adaptive balance between isolation and intimacy in the development of intimate relationships. My dissertation is based on the ideas that the stage of young adulthood contains two separate but concomitant processes: *isolation and intimacy*; and that these processes contain four dimensions: *dystonic isolation (DIS), syntonic isolation (SIS), dystonic intimacy (DIN),* and *syntonic intimacy (SIN).*

Data for this analysis come from autobiographical papers provided by young adult college students written during an undergraduate intimate relationships course offered by a family science department at a large Midwestern University.

Antecedent steps leading to the propositions guiding the present study resulted from reconceptualization of Erikson's psychosocial developmental model. This pre-work

was an integral aspect of the research process and the current propositions could not have been formulated without this process.

Guiding Propositions

Proposition1: Isolation (IS) and intimacy (IN) are two separate psychosocial processes that occur concomitantly.

Proposition 2: There are four dimensions in the psychosocial process to seek adaptive balance between isolation (IS) and intimacy (IN): dystonic isolation (DIS), syntonic isolation (SIS), dystonic intimacy (DIN) and syntonic intimacy (SIN).

Proposition 3: Student autobiographical narratives will contain depictions of processes to seek adaptive balance between (1) dystonic isolation and syntonic isolation (DIS and SIS) and (2) dystonic intimacy and syntonic intimacy (DIN and SIN) in the young adulthood developmental stage.

Context of the Study

Undergraduate intimate relationships course. Context in this study is important because Erikson proposed that human psychosocial development occurred in the interaction with the social world (1950a)**.** In this study the context for the writing of students' final papers was an intimate relationships course taught at a large Midwestern University.

The course is attended each semester by between 150-240 students from across the University. As many as 70 different undergraduate majors are represented by the students who participated (Newell, 2012) in this course. A partial description of the course is as follows:

> *Intimate Relationships* is a course that focuses on the interpersonal dynamics of couples, and on the dynamics of couples-in-context. We will explore how intimate evolve and develop – and how they succeed or fail (Mendenhall, 2011).

Students from across the University flock to this course as they seek to better understand the development of intimate relationships.

Psychosocial developmental context. Students were themselves in the young adulthood stage of development when they wrote their autobiographical narratives. Therefore, the context for the narratives was that of the young adulthood stage, where the central psychosocial task is the development of intimate relationships. This is a central strength of the narratives analyzed for this study because young adult college students depicted, in their own words, their lived-experiences in the development of romantic intimate relationships.

Macro-level societal context. Students of this intimate relationships course were embedded within the broader societal context of the present Western culture of the 21st century. This is important to the findings of this study, as the socialization processes and expectations for 21st century young adults varies significantly from young adults of the 1950s when Erikson first presented his model. Young adults of the 1950s were marrying at the youngest ages in American history (i.e., women at 20 and men by 23) and nearly all young adults (95% of whites and 88% of African Americans) married (Cherlin, 2005). In contrast, today's young adults, provided with more options due to changing gender norm expectations and greater options resulting from education, tend to prolong the onset to marriage – if they choose marry at all (Cherlin, 2005).

A Narrative Approach

The perspective taken in the analysis of these autobiographical papers is that of a narrative view. From this view, human beings tell stories (narrative) about themselves and their experiences in an effort to make sense of their lives, to assign meaning to their lived experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988). According to Polkinghorne, human beings engage in an activity he called "self-study" which can be carried out through the process of reflection; this is one of the many ways human beings seek to understand themselves and their lives. Writing a narrative account of one's experiences can also be considered a form of meaning-making, in other words, telling or writing an account, or story, of lived experience events is a part of the process to make our experiences meaningful and according to Conway and Holmes (2004), "autobiographical memories define the self" (p. 461). From this view, student narratives depicting the development of romantic intimate relationships allow us to witness the psychosocial developmental process the young adult students in this study experienced when engaged in the development of romantic intimate relationships.

Conway and Holmes (2004) utilized autobiographical narrative accounts in an effort to understand psychosocial development over the life course. They tested their hypothesis that self goals change over time and resultant memories are highly accessible. Further, Conway and Holmes posit that these memories "ground the self in past goal configurations and so provide a personal, psychological history of changes to the self" (p. 462). The purpose of their study was to examine the most accessible autobiographical memories in elders to assess what content represented the goals of the self (i.e.,

psychosocial development) at various stages over the life course. Older adults engaged first in free recall memories, and then wrote narrative descriptions of their memories at ten year intervals. Memories were then classified to psychosocial stages and plotted by age (e.g., memories coded as being from the isolation and intimacy stage would have occurred when the participant was in the young adulthood age range). The findings from this study supported Eriksonian psychosocial development over the life span and the notion that autobiographical memory captures developmental processes of importance to the developing self.

Mackinnon, Nosko, Pratt, and Norris (2011) asked participants to provide two stories about the development of intimate relationships in order to determine differences, if any, between friendship intimacy (called "true friendship") and romantic intimacy (called "true love") in a college age sample. The authors determined similarities between the two forms of intimacy but also identified notable differences. Similarities included narratives depicting demonstrations of support and caring between friends and also with romantic partners. The differences, however, were found in the language used to describe the experience of support: when describing support from a romantic partner, this was viewed as evidence of the partner's commitment and care depicting qualities desired for a long-term partner. Friendship support was both given and received, but did not hold the level of significance as did the support provided by the romantic partner (Mackinnon et al., 2011) frames these differences as coming from societal messages about what it means to have "true love". The findings of the MacKinnon et al. study provide an example of a

contemporary study which utilized a narrative approach to understand the development of intimacy in young adult college students**.**

These studies demonstrate the importance of autobiographical narrative for learning more about the processes involved in Erikson's intimacy and isolation stage. However, each of these studies focused on only one pole of the developmental process between *intimacy and isolation*: intimacy. Once again, perpetuating the notion that one of the poles is desirable over the other, thereby maintaining the notion that intimacy is the end goal, whereas Erikson and colleagues (1986) maintained that psychosocial development included both poles in the young adulthood stage, isolation and intimacy, in what they termed the "dynamic balance of opposites" (p. 8).

Self of the Researcher

As I have an extensive background related to the subject matter of this study, I will address here my involvement prior to the study and how this led me to design and conduct this study analyzing young adult college students' autobiographical narratives.

Intimate relationships course discussion leader. In the fall of 2010, I was invited to be a part of the teaching team for the intimate relationships course offered through the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota. Upon the first few weeks of my engagement in this teaching opportunity, I witnessed students actively engaging in the course, talking about making changes in their lives and this caught my attention. As a social worker and parent educator, I had worked for years with children and youth, and also with parents; my predominant experience was seeing people make small changes over a long period of time. When I witnessed students making

significant changes in a very short period of time, I wondered what was going on here. I felt that I was in the middle of a phenomenon. I wondered if former students were as engaged as the students I was witnessing. What would they say about their participation in this course?

First study of the Intimate Relationships course. I conducted the first ever study of this intimate relationships course. In my study (Newell, 2012) former students (n=256) of this intimate relationships course responded to questions about their participation in the course. The main take-away from this study was the finding that 80% of former students when asked," Did you make any significant changes in your intimate relationships resulting from participation in this course?" answered, "Yes," I then asked students to describe the changes they made resultant from participation in this course.

Inductive content analysis. I conducted an inductive content analysis of student narrative depictions describing the changes they made in their intimate relationships resultant from participation in this course. The following three themes emerged:

- Increased awareness of self as a relational person
- Greater insight into relationships with others
- Increased action to be more mindful and aware in relationships.

From participant accounts, a picture emerged of very active and engaged students, making changes in their intimate relationships and changes that were viewed by them as significant. With these findings, more questions arose and I sought further to understand how these changes may have come about. Student descriptions of the things they liked

most about the course revealed top scores for the professor of this course and I next sought to understand what the professor was doing in his teaching style.

Pedagogical model. Resulting from my analysis, I developed the following pedagogical model, as I felt it depicted the philosophical and teaching approach utilized in this course. The six component pedagogical model is as follows:

- Engaging students
- Viewing students as co-constructors of knowledge
- Honoring personal meaning generation
- Respecting personal lived experience
- Presenting relevant content about respectful and caring relationships
- Encouraging self-focus and care in relationships

This pedagogical model, I believed, helped us to understand what was happening in the learning process for students who were actively engaged and applying course concepts to their own lives. The result of this active engagement was the self-described changes made be students in their intimate relationships. A major feature of this developmental process was the writing of an autobiographical paper depicting students' understanding of the development of intimate relationships and to write about their own personal experience to demonstrate their knowledge of the course. Autobiographical papers, on average, were about 25 pages in length.

Dissertation direction. Having worked with more than 200 hundred students in the intimate relationships course, and having read and graded equally as many personal narratives written by students, I felt there was more to learn about the development of

intimate relationships for young adults. Further, I believed that analyzing autobiographical narratives written by young adult college students would provide greater insight into this developmental process. Conversations with my committee members encouraged me to find a theoretical framework which would help me to understand the changes I was witnessing in students' descriptions of their intimate relationships.

Seeking to understand Eriksonian theory. As a social worker and parent educator, I knew of and worked with Erikson's psychosocial theory, especially for conversations with parents to help them understand typical and atypical child development. I knew Erikson's model from birth to adolescence. It wasn't until I revisited Erikson's psychosocial developmental model and read his early works (Erikson, 1950a, Erikson, 1950b) that I learned his initial presentation was the result of a national effort to provide a way for U.S. parents to understand "normal" child development (Erikson, 1950b). Prior to this time, Erikson had been associated with Freud and his psychosexual stages and included these ideas in the development of a stage theory, but departed from Freud by his focus upon human development as occurring in one's interactions with the social world.

The Young Adulthood Stage. Upon revisiting Erikson's full psychosocial developmental model, I gained important information about the young adulthood stage – specifically, that the main psychosocial task for young adults is the development of intimate relationships. This was the lynchpin in my research; I believed that students were making significant changes in their intimate relationships because developmentally, this is exactly what they were motivated to do: to develop intimate relationships.

As I sought to gain a deeper understanding of Erikson's theory, I conceptualized a way of viewing his model, making each stage explicit and depicting greater levels of complexity than had been previously demonstrated in a simple, dichotomous model.

Reconceptualization of the Young Adulthood Stage

My reconceptualization contains purposeful variations, additions, and departures from Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick's (1986) final presentation of Erikson's psychosocial developmental model. The major departure is that isolation and intimacy are viewed as two separate but concomitant processes, each containing dystonic and syntonic dimensions.

Reversal of poles. Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick (1986) when proposing the "dynamic balance of opposites" introduced the terms *syntonic* and *dystonic* to describe each of the two poles in each of the eight stages. Later, Waterman (2012) introduced the notion of a ratio for measurement and also provides a definition for each of these terms as follows:

a. ***Syntonic* (+)**. (i.e., "it makes us feel good; it is what we would like to experience" p. 547).
b. ***Dystonic* (-)**. (i.e., "it is associated with functioning poorly, feeling bad; it is something we would wish to avoid" p. 547).

According to these definitions, each of the poles presented in each of the eight stages depicts a process to seek balance between syntonic and dystonic outcomes. Following this way of thinking, Erikson originally presented his stage theory with the proposition that success in one of the poles (i.e., trust over mistrust in the first stage)

would indicate healthy human development (Erikson, 1950b). Upon consideration of these poles as syntonic and dystonic, and following the notion that a greater number of syntonic experiences in each stage would signal successful movement from one stage to the next along the life course, I propose that the terms (as Erikson presented them originally) should now be reversed (i.e., the original stage of *trust vs. mistrust* should now be called *mistrust and trust*). Reversing the placement of the terms (when thought of as dystonic and syntonic) would theoretically, suggest that a greater ratio of syntonic outcomes in each stage would lead to the next stage of psychosocial development over the life course (i.e., moving in an additive direction: adding more years to the life course over time).

Isolation and Intimacy as Concomitant Processes. This study focuses on the isolation and intimacy stage of Erikson's psychosocial developmental model.

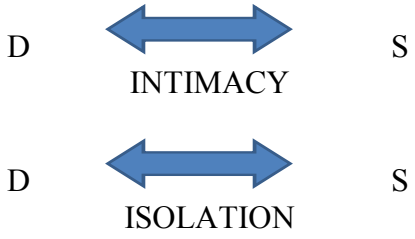

Figure 1. **Isolation and intimacy as concomitant processes**

In this stage, I propose a change in the view of the isolation and intimacy process by positing that isolation and intimacy are two separate dimensions operating concomitantly. Additionally, each process contains syntonic and dystonic dimensions. This stage has historically been perceived as a balance between dystonic (isolation) and syntonic (intimacy) poles of the stage (i.e., a greater ratio of syntonic experiences in

intimacy would theoretically advance psychosocial development from this stage to the next) (Waterman, 2012). My new propositions expand that view to posit two separate but concomitant processes, isolation and intimacy, each containing syntonic and dystonic dimensions. First, let me begin by proposing that Erikson's description of the stage of intimacy and isolation (as it was first named) provides a definition which attributes *syntonic* outcomes exclusively to *intimacy* and *dystonic* outcomes exclusively to *isolation*.

Intimacy. Erikson viewed the young adulthood stage as the optimal time for the development of intimate relationships and the psychosocial strengths associated with intimacy:

> The capacity to commit himself to concrete affiliations and partnerships and to develop the ethical strength to abide by such commitments, even though they may call for significant sacrifices and compromises…in order to be able to face the fear of ego loss in situations that call for self-abandon: in the solidarity of close affiliations, in orgasms and sexual unions, in close friendships and in physical combat, in experiences of inspiration by teachers and of intuition from the recesses of the self (Erikson, 1950a, p. 263-264).

Erikson's definition for intimacy was broader than the focus of this study. Nevertheless, he outlines his view of intimacy as including intimate sexual unions, which for the present study suggests romantic intimate relationships.

Isolation. Erikson's definition of isolation depicts it as the opposite of intimacy:

> The counterpart of intimacy is distantiation: the readiness to isolate and, if necessary, to destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one's own, and whose "territory" seems to encroach on the extent of one's intimate relations (Erikson, 1950a, p. 264).

According to Erikson, the avoidance of such experiences (intimacy as described above) because of the fear of ego loss, may lead to a deep sense of isolation and consequent self-absorption. Clearly, in these definitions intimacy is portrayed as syntonic and the desired developmental outcome in this stage. Conversely, isolation is portrayed as dystonic, and it is inferred to be the opposite of intimacy. In my proposition, I posit that intimacy and isolation are two separate and concomitant processes.

Four Dimensions of Psychosocial Development

I propose that there are four dimensions in the psychosocial developmental process to seek adaptive balance among the dimensions of *isolation and intimacy*. They are as follows:

a. (DIS) Dystonic isolation (-)
b. (SIS) Syntonic isolation (+)
c. (DIN) Dystonic intimacy (-)
d. (SIN) Syntonic intimacy (+)

The justification for this proposition comes from the meanings of the terms syntonic and dystonic. According to Waterman (2012), the term syntonic means "makes us feel good; it is what we would like to experience" (p. 547) and suggests (+). Conversely, according to Waterman (2012), the term dystonic means "is associated with

functioning poorly, feeling bad; it is something we would wish to avoid" (p. 547) and suggests (-). In this way of thinking, the developmental processes to seek adaptive balance among the four dimensions of the young adulthood stage suggests that human development is never static but rather dynamic and always in flux, and that isolation can also make one feel good and intimacy can make one feel bad – it is a process of adaptation with one's social world. In the proposed model, human psychosocial development is best understood as a process to seek adaptive balance among the four dimensions, and rejects a single focus (i.e., the development of *intimacy* alone, as depicted in Erikson's original stage theory and which persists in on-going research into the *isolation and intimacy* stage for young adults.

A new definition of isolation. In Erikson's dichotomous model, isolation and intimacy are viewed as polar opposites, where isolation has been viewed exclusively as dystonic: i.e., feeling bad and functioning poorly. In the current study, a new definition of isolation is called for wherein isolation is viewed as both dystonic (i.e. feeling bad and functioning poorly) and as syntonic (i.e. feeling good and functioning well) in interactions with romantic others in the young adulthood stage. The heart of this definition is that young adults have the capacity to also experience syntonic isolation (i.e., to feel good and function well when not with the romantic other) in addition to the long referenced dystonic isolation. Syntonic isolation is a psychosocial developmental process that young adults may experience as they navigate the development of romantic, intimate relationships; it is viewed as desirable. While typical psychosocial development suggests

movement between and among dimensions of this model, extreme states of dystonic or syntonic isolation may be viewed as problematic.

A new definition of intimacy. As with the development of a new definition for isolation in the young adulthood stage, so also a new definition for intimacy is required. Historically, according to the Eriksonian view, intimacy was viewed as syntonic (i.e., feeling good and functioning well in romantic, intimate relationships). The view of the current study is that intimacy can be viewed as both dystonic (i.e., feeling bad and functioning poorly when in a romantic intimate relationship) as well has the long referenced syntonic intimacy. Furthermore, experiencing dystonic intimacy is a psychosocial developmental process that young adults may experience as they navigate the development of romantic, intimate relationships; it is viewed as an aspect of typical development. Extreme states of dystonic or syntonic intimacy may be viewed as problematic.

Adaptive balance. Erikson's model is psychosocial, with an emphasis on human development occurring in one's interaction with the social world, in a word: adaptation. For the purposes of this study I modified what Karush, Easser., Cooper, and Swerdloff (1964) called adaptive balance. From their view adaptive balance was understood as "The capacity for successful psychological adaptation, or ego strength" (p. 332). While Karush and colleagues were discussing the diagnosis of mental health issues, this study does not use the term diagnostically.

In this dissertation, I view adaptive balance as psychosocial development that occurs in the interactions an individual has with his or her social world; it is contextual.

In the young adulthood stage, the context for adaptive balance is the development of intimate relationships. As young adults may encounter numerous potential romantic others, and interact directly with several romantic others, adaptive balance is viewed as always in flux, potentially adapting to different romantic others, as well as varying social, contextual changes, requiring adaptation with the social world. In this way of viewing psychosocial development, adaptive balance is never fixed or finally achieved; rather, student narratives provide us a glimpse into the interactive world of psychosocial development: always evolving and changing in response to the social context of romantic, intimate relationships.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Erikson's Psychosocial Model

Over the years, numerous studies have been conducted to test various aspects of Erikson's psychosocial model. One of the earliest studies to investigate the isolation and intimacy process in young adulthood was by Yufit (1956). Yufit's study, an unpublished dissertation at the University of Chicago, collected data from college freshmen. It sought to determine characteristics of individuals in the isolation and intimacy stage. Based on his data analysis, he specified two types of individuals: intimates and isolates (1956). Marcia (1966) later developed a measure to validate the ego-status of identity within the domains of occupation, religion, and politics. Marcia proposed four ego-statuses: Identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and identity diffusion, based on the presence of "crisis" and "commitment" descriptions in semistructured interviews. Following this, Orlofsky, Marcia, and Lesser (1973) built upon Yufit's work by identifying an additional status in the isolation and intimacy process and posited the categories of intimates, preintimates, and isolates (p. 213). Another significant contribution of Orlofsky and colleagues was that Marcia's identity statuses were examined with their three proposed intimacy statuses. Orlofsky et al. (1973) wrote:

> The major hypothesis of the current study is that those subjects closest to identity achievement would also be establishing relationships coming closest to fulfilling the criteria for intimacy. Hence, a correspondence between identity statuses and intimacy statuses was predicted (p. 214).

Grotevant, Thorbecke, and Meyer (1982) expanded upon Marcia's four ego-statuses by moving from a global level conceptualization of identity and extended the interview schedule into three interpersonal domains: friendships, dating, and sex roles. Grotevant and colleagues provided greater insight into the process of identity development for adolescents by shifting away from the notion of a "crisis" in the stage to that of "exploration" (p. 37), and introducing the notion that adolescents, in identity exploration, begin to explore various roles in the development of an identity. Another significant contribution to the understanding of identity development in adolescence made by Grotevant et al. was the distinction drawn between male and female identity development, in particular, that the development of identity for females is concomitant with the development of interpersonal relationships (p. 38). Thinking about gender socialization and the development of romantic intimate relationships is important. As society has evolved and changed over time perspectives on gender have become more visible (Newell & Bohlinger, 2014) and incorporated into thoughts about romantic intimate relationship development.

Ordered Stages

Erikson's psychosocial developmental model has become an integral and nearly seamless perspective in human development arenas, undergirding our thoughts about human development. Due to its long history, this model has rarely been challenged. Recently, a 21st century resurgence of interest in Erikson's model has produced a number of studies. A number of studies have focused upon testing the notion of psychosocial development as being ordered (e.g., Arseth, Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2009;

Conway & Holmes, 2004; Mackinnon et al., 2011; Sneed, Whitbourne, Schwartz, & Huang, 2012), thereby supporting Erikson's epigenetic principle of development occurring at optimal times over the life course. This notion of staged, or ordered, development is most clearly seen in Erikson's fifth stage, adolescence, where the ego developmental process is described as seeking balance between *identity diffusion and identity***.**

Furthermore, numerous studies have investigated Erikson's fifth and sixth stages together: *identity diffusion and identity* with *intimacy and isolation* ego-developmental tasks. These studies set out to test the link between identity development and the development of intimacy in young adulthood (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Mackinnon et al., 2011; Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman, & Vaughn, 2011; Seginer & Noyman, 2005; Sneed et al, 2012). Specifically, Beyers and Seiffge-Krenke (2010) tested this hypothesis and presented findings from their study that identity at age 15 predicts intimacy at age 25 in males. Further, they continued the discussion regarding gender differences addressed by others before them, and concluded female identity development and the development of intimacy are concomitant. That is, women are believed to develop identity alongside the development of intimacy with others. Generally speaking, including the ongoing discussion of gendered notions of identity development, 21st century research supports the notion that human psychosocial development occurs in a theoretically proposed progression that can be referred to as staged and ordered.

While stages can be revisited throughout the life course, success in each stage at the optimal time makes success in the ensuing stages possible, and more likely. Research supports this most clearly in Erikson's fifth stage: *identity and identity diffusion* and the sixth stage: *intimacy and isolation*, respectively. The focus of this study is on Erikson's sixth stage, originally referred to as "intimacy vs. isolation"; for the purposes of this study, I refer to this stage as "*isolation and intimacy*".

From Success in One Dimension to Dynamic Balance of Opposites

In previous studies testing Eriksonian theory, the focus remained upon only one dimension of the psychosocial developmental process (i.e., intimacy). Consequently, the bi-polar process to seek balance between the poles in each stage was not investigated. In most studies the focus was upon only one of the two poles in each stage (e.g., identity, intimacy, generativity), thereby suggesting an implicit assumption that success in each stage requires success in just one of the poles, and not both. This is a limitation in studies conducted without investigating both poles in each stage.

Erikson's original presentation of his stage theory purported only one of the two poles presented in each stage to be deemed optimal (i.e., in the stage of trust vs. mistrust, trust was deemed optimal). This shift away from the focus on one pole as optimal to the inclusion of both poles in a "dynamic balance of opposites" is only made clear by Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick (1986) documenting their research findings. Their research utilized data collected from 28 participants in the "Guidance Study" of the Institute of Human Development, from the University of California at Berkeley (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986). The authors analyzed data provided to them by participants who were in

the eighth of Erikson's stages, *integrity and despair*, wherein the developmental task is to come to a sense of balance between despair and integrity with one's life in a final, integrated life narrative. Looking back over their lives participants provided narrative accounts for each of Erikson's eight stages of development, recollecting the most salient stories from each of the stages for evidence of psychosocial development and growth. The analytic process involved face to face interviews when participants were, on average, in their 80s, followed by an examination of the data collected at each of the previous seven stages (i.e., the study started when participants were infants and initially included reports from their parents). Follow-up interviews were conducted when data from earlier interviews and data from the most current interviews seemed to be inconsistent.

Participants who were enrolled in the study and provided data at incremental points over 50 years of their lives and were also in the last of Erikson's stages during their retrospective recounting, thereby providing an unprecedented opportunity for Erikson and colleagues to test his original theory. It was through this process that Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick (Kivnick, personal communication, Aug. 2013) clarified the epigenetic quality of life span development; as an ongoing process of seeking balance between the poles noted in each of the eight stages. Consequently, the term "vs." was eliminated from the model, as this term was determined to be limiting and did not capture the lived developmental process over time. From that point (1986) forward, each stage containing two poles should now be referred to as "and" – for example, the stage of young adulthood would now be referred to as *intimacy and isolation.* This is an important clarification, because it now requires research to investigate all dimensions in this stage.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Deductive Content Analysis

This study was approved by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board. The analytical approach utilized was a theory-guided, structured deductive content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) maintain that this approach can "provide predictions about the variables of interest or about the relationships among variables, thus helping to determine the initial coding scheme or relationships between codes" (p. 1281). Furthermore, Elo and Kyngas state the aim of content analysis is to build a model to "describe the phenomenon in a conceptual form" (p. 107).

Deductive content analysis was the best analytical approach to explore theoretical issues related to the psychosocial developmental process in Erikson's young adulthood stage and to build a model to describe the phenomenon in conceptual form. It was best because I had selected Erikson's psychosocial theory as a framework and engaged in a reconceptualization from which I theorized three propositions for this study. Instead of doing an inductive content analysis, I did a deductive content analysis guided by my theory. Text analyzed came directly from young adults depicting the development of their romantic intimate relationships and were therefore describing the phenomenon in question. Working from propositions I developed prior to the analysis, deductive content analysis guided my coding of the text as I explored the viability of my theoretical analysis as applied to the 20 papers in this study.

Sample

Data for this study come from a sample of autobiographical papers written by 20 young adult college students, freshmen through seniors, between 18 and 24 years of age. Eighteen papers were written by female students, and two were written by men. Papers were drawn from an intimate relationships course at a large Midwestern University and were provided by students with permission to be used for teaching purposes.

Unit of Analysis

The autobiographical papers analyzed for this study were selected due to receiving high scores and being classified as exemplar papers for teaching purposes in this intimate relationships course. By demonstrating that they understood course concepts and providing descriptions of their own lived-experiences in the development of romantic intimate relationships, these papers were ideal for this deductive content analysis. While students could write about any topic from the course, text analyzed for this research was narrowed to description of the development of romantic intimate relationships.

Meaning Units

Meaning units for this analysis are sections of content in students' papers containing narrative description of the proposed theoretical dimensions: DIS, SIS, DIN, and SIN.

Two Phase Analytical Process

Phase I. During the first phase of directed content analysis all text determined to contain meaning units with description of each of the four proposed dimensions was coded.

1. Text was categorized by assigning predetermined codes. The identified text was placed in a categorization matrix.
2. Text that was deemed to be related to the theorized process but did not fit into the predetermined codes, was saved and revisited after the initial coding process to determine inclusion and/or assignment of a new category.

Phase II. During the second phase of directed content analysis, all instances depicting the process to seek *adaptive balance between two dimensions* were identified in the text and placed in a categorization matrix.

a. Dystonic isolation (DIS) to syntonic isolation (SIS)
b. Dystonic intimacy (DIN) to syntonic intimacy (SIN)

Instances depicting the process of the *pairing of dimensions* were identified in the text and placed in a categorization matrix.

a. Dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy (DIS-DIN)
b. Syntonic isolation and syntonic intimacy (SIS-SIN)

Instances depicting the process to seek *adaptive balance among the four dimensions* were identified in the text and placed in a categorization matrix.

a. Dystonic isolation-dystonic intimacy (DIS-DIN) pairing to syntonic isolation (SIS)
b. Dystonic intimacy-dystonic isolation (DIN-DIS) pairing to syntonic intimacy (SIN)
c. Dystonic isolation (DIS) to syntonic isolation-syntonic intimacy (SIS-SIN) pairing

d. Dystonic intimacy (DIN) to syntonic intimacy-syntonic isolation (SIN-SIN) pairing
e. Dystonic isolation-dystonic intimacy (DIS-DIN) pairing to syntonic isolation-syntonic intimacy (SIS-SIN) pairing.

Memoing

Insights and understandings about the categories and themes that emerged during these analytic processes were expanded through the writing process. Memos were written throughout the analytic process.

Analytic memos. This form of memo was used to document analytic thinking about the identification of concepts.

Reflexivity memos. The use of reflexivity memos is important in qualitative research because it gives a way to process through thinking about areas of uncertainty, or where there may be a personal reaction to the material (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Reflexivity writing is also an important analytical tool used while conducting directed content analysis as it helps researchers to address inherent bias. Specifically, because I was a part of the teaching team for two years, I read and graded more than 200 autobiographical papers in the intimate relationships course. Further, because I conducted the first study of this course (an inductive content analysis), I have a very close connection to this material. It is also important to note that the propositions that guided the analysis of this study were generated from the process of reconceptualizing Erikson's psychosocial model, and not generated directly from any previous contact with student narrative papers. The use of reflexivity memoing was a critical tool for me to question my

thoughts and my interpretations of the data. I worked closely with my co-advisers, Drs. Paul Rosenblatt and Tai Mendenhall, throughout the entire research process and shared my reflexivity memos with them. Receiving feedback from them provided a kind of auditing of certain phases of the research process.

Trustworthiness

All steps of the analytic and reporting process were supervised by my co-advisers. We met in person to discuss and audit the initial 20% of findings. Each ensuing step in the analysis process was submitted to my advisers, reviewed by them, and written critique was then provided to me. All steps in the reporting and writing phases of my dissertation were supervised, critiqued, and edited by my co-advisers.

Chapter 4: Findings

The papers analyzed for this study collectively contained 546 pages; 12,026 lines of narrative text were devoted to description of the four dimensions. The greatest amount of description was of dystonic intimacy (DIN), followed by dystonic isolation (DIS) in Phase I. Additional narrative was identified in Phase II that was devoted specifically to depiction of the process to seek adaptive balance among the four dimensions. The greatest amount of description was given to the process to move from dystonic isolation to syntonic isolation (DIS to SIS), depicting adaptive balance between two dimensions.

Phase I: Four Dimensions

Isolation (IS)

The following section presents findings derived from deductive content analysis of students' autobiographical narratives depicting the development of intimate relationships in the young adulthood stage. The psychosocial developmental process of isolation contains two dimensions: dystonic and syntonic.

Dystonic isolation (DIS). Narrative depicting the first of the four proposed dimensions, dystonic isolation, was divided into description of students' experiences when single and also when in a romantic, intimate relationship. There was a range of description of dystonic isolation found in the autobiographical narrative depictions. The second highest amount of text written by students was devoted to description that was deemed dystonic isolation in the study.

***Dystonic isolation as a single person*.** Learning how to be on one's own when transitioning to freshman year in college, combined with the developmental desire to be

coupled with a romantic other during this time, creates a unique context for the experience of dystonic isolation for some students. In the following narrative a student had just transitioned to college and was away from her romantic other after a recent break-up:

> For the first time since I was 14 years old, I was justifiably single. Going into college, I often thought about ending things with John but when he ended things about two months into college, I honestly didn't know what to do with myself. I constantly felt sick to my stomach, it was a considerable struggle to get up in the morning and there were moments when I would be doing homework and just burst into tears. Yes, I was still in love with John but a majority of the battle was trying to deal with truly being alone for the first time. I didn't have anyone to talk to about my bad days, or call when my fish died, and most importantly to tell me they loved me. As a person, you change considerably from the time you're 14 to when you go into college and as someone who had been in a relationship all those years, I hadn't grown as an individual because I always had that someone else to share my struggles, pain, and even triumphs with. So when I was finally alone, I mean completely alone, no parents or boyfriend, I was helpless (Paper 17).

Shortly after arriving on the scene of her new collegiate life — away from home, friends, and her romantic other — her loved one ended their relationship. In addition to beginning life on her own, she described what it was like to do this while experiencing the pain of losing her romantic other. She said that she had not grown as an individual for many years. Not knowing how to function well without a romantic other she seems to feel

destitute. This disclosure hits the conceptual nerve of dystonic isolation – she stated, "I was helpless."

Having been engaged in a romantic, intimate relationship throughout her adolescence and into the early stages of her young adulthood, she sheds light upon why the transition was so devastating for her:

> Being truly single for the first time was one of the most challenging tasks that I have ever faced and also overcome. For some, being single is one of the easiest things to do but it's because it's what they know best. Well for me, relationships are what I knew best. They were my comfort zones, my "safe haven" and without them, I didn't know much else (Paper 17).

Learning to be "truly single for the first time" is a revealing statement for a young adult of 18 years of age; it tells us that by forming romantic, intimate relationships in her very young adolescence she had not learned how to be self-nurturing, how to know herself and care for herself without the interaction of a romantic, intimate other. Her narrative opens up for us the lived experience of dystonic isolation: feeling bad and functioning poorly when not with an intimate other.

Another common experience for young adults is the break-up. The intense feelings experienced during a break-up often lead to feelings of deep isolation. For one young man, post break-up was devastating as he navigated his personal feelings about himself when his ex-girlfriend threatened suicide:

> The breakup was as bad as you can imagine and a couple days after I broke it off, she texted me saying that she had almost killed herself that night. This tore me

> apart and I started to hate myself for it. I couldn't accept the fact that I did what I had to do. The guilt shame and self-hate became so prominent in my relationship with myself. I felt that I had taken her happiness and therefore I felt that I didn't deserve my own happiness. My lack of forgiveness for myself caused me to view myself as a bad person. I started to push away the people that I care about because I developed a fear of hurting them. I put a lot of effort into trying to prevent myself from being happy (Paper 16).

For this young man, dystonic isolation resulted from a decision to end a relationship that was not working for him. By choosing to focus upon himself and end his intimate relationship, he experienced a kind of dystonic isolation in which his feelings were turned inward upon himself. Expressing self-hatred, he described how this affected his relationships with others: he pushed others away and did all he could to prevent himself from being happy.

Dystonic isolation in romantic intimate relationships. Many of the paper-writers seem to believe that they will not feel isolated or alone if they are in a romantic, intimate relationship. The search for the right partner is often an integral part of college life. However, even within committed, romantic, intimate relationships, dystonic isolation can be present. In the following excerpt this young woman granted us insight into how fear of being alone, without her intimate other, affected her and her relationship:

> I am the sort of person who likes to travel frequently, but only live in one place. Ashton, on the other hand, wants to live in different parts of the world for short periods of time (semesters, essentially) while he is young. He frequently talks

> about his dreams to study abroad in Europe or intern in Washington, D.C., and whenever he does this I feel as though he would rather be somewhere else than with me. I know this to be irrational, but that does not stop me from worrying and desperately trying to spend more time with him, since I feel as though he could pack up his bags and leave at any minute...I am always terribly conflicted, as I know that I need to be able to be happy by myself, otherwise my relationships, romantic or not, will be unhealthy, but at the same time I cannot help but miss Ashton terribly when he is gone (Paper 13).

This young woman admitted being conflicted (knowing she needs to be self-focused) but that she also missed her boyfriend when he was away. Some aspects of dystonic isolation when in a committed, romantic relationship make sense, e.g., missing a loved one when s/he is away. However in this passage, this student provided greater insight into her sense of dystonic isolation when offering that the context of their conversation was about her partner potentially studying abroad or otherwise being geographically away from her. At the heart of this young woman's dystonic isolation within her intimate relationship was her fear of losing her partner.

Dystonic isolation can also occur for one individual while in a committed couple relationship. A type of romantic, intimate relationship that seems to bring this experience out quite significantly is the long distance relationship (LDR). Highlighting a complex interaction of dystonic isolation within a romantic, intimate relationship that is long distance, a young woman described her attempt to attend to her partner's needs all the while she dealt with her own fear of losing him:

> His sense of social isolation is apparent and I am helping him to gain a better understanding of how to deal with these emotions and communicating them to his family. It is an ongoing process that I am prepared to help him with and I plan to utilize many of the tools I have learned in aiding him to do so. Keith and I have also developed a sense of attachment anxiety, or should I say I am the one that has developed it. With my fear of losing him I have begun to anticipate the loss of emotional attachment and communication. These anxious thoughts are prolonged and worsened through the emotional memories I have of rejection and abandonment from previous relationships (Paper 20).

As this young woman confronted her personal dystonic isolation within the relationship, she admitted to expecting her current relationship to end. She recognized that the source of this personal anxiety stemmed from previous relationships gone bad. In this complex picture we can see the presence of dystonic isolation for this young woman which, undoubtedly, contributed to dystonic intimacy in the relationship overall.

Syntonic isolation (SIS). The following operational definition was used during deductive content analysis: Syntonic isolation (SIS) will provide description of feeling good and functioning well when not with the (a) romantic other.

Narrative depicting the second of the four proposed dimensions, syntonic isolation, was divided into description of students' experiences when single and also when in a romantic, intimate relationship. Students provided the least amount of narrative depiction of syntonic isolation, compared to the other three dimensions. When student narratives were coded as syntonic isolation, while they did not write as frequently or with

as much range in description, they did provide examples of what they felt helped them to experience greater levels of syntonic isolation.

Syntonic isolation as a single person. A majority of students provided storylines which detailed multiple, long-term intimate relationships starting when they were in their adolescence. Furthermore, entering the university as a freshman meant truly embracing the experience of being alone, many for the first time, increasing the likelihood of experiencing dystonic isolation. A different view of isolation was provided by a young adult man who was a senior in college. He discussed the great strides he made in his sense of himself before entering his current romantic, intimate relationship:

> Before I met Brad I had gone the longest I had ever gone in my life without being in a relationship, nearly 4 years. Over this 4-year span I grew to understand many things about myself. I found that I could feel some sense of validity and security within myself. I could be happy being the person I wanted to be without having any shame" (Paper 20).

Herein we are introduced to the notion of syntonic isolation. In the passage above, this young man, after remaining single throughout his college years, entered a romantic, intimate relationship as a senior with a strong sense of syntonic isolation. The student attributes this to spending his college years as a single person and growing as an individual over that time.

In another narrative, as a young woman discussed her transition to her freshman year in college, she wrote about how focusing upon herself was empowering for her. Referring to a reading assignment, she stated:

> Another aspect that Woodward advised was to not expect too much [from a romantic partner] and depend on yourself, and I did just that. For the first time, I wasn't looking for someone- someone to make me feel good about myself, or call when I had a bad day. I dealt with all my issues on my own. If there was someone out there for me, it would just happen and I had finally accepted that reality and with that in mind, I spent my time focusing and depending on myself (Paper 17).

The strong sense of pride this young woman felt is evident in her statement about spending time focusing upon herself and not depending upon others. Syntonic isolation is about the developmental process of coming to know, love, and appreciate one's self. Later in her narrative, this young woman sang the praises of being single. She said:

> You are the only one that you are around 24/7 and you can learn so much from that time. I wouldn't trade the time that I was single for anything because it was a time that I was able to reevaluate my life and really answer the questions, "Where have I been? Where am I going?" (Paper 17).

She stated that this experience helped her to reevaluate her life and answer questions that were important to her. The challenge in the young adulthood stage seems to be that while all the world around and within young adults pulls for romantic, intimate relationships – the relationship with the self is also important – and perhaps central to the developmental process.

Syntonic isolation in romantic intimate relationships. In the following excerpt, a student cited a central theme that ran through the intimate relationship course he participated in: 1+1=2. This way of thinking counters the relationship myth that 1+1=1;

the oft believed and sought after experience for young lovers that if we are together, then we must become "one." In Eriksonian thinking, nothing could be further from the truth. Developing and maintaining syntonic isolation within an intimate relationship is a central feature of syntonic intimacy relationships. He goes on:

> If I was to only remember one thing from this class it will be this and it will be this that I will use to improve my relationships in the future. I will remind my partner and myself that we are both unique individuals and by viewing the relationship as two instead of one we shall be greater for it. To lose our individuality in the relationship would be a great loss. If I am in a relationship and I am not proud of who I have become I won't be proud of who "we" have become. I must love myself before I can love the rest of the world (Paper 16).

Having gained insight into the value of establishing and maintaining syntonic isolation within his intimate relationship, he made the poignant claim that he must love himself first. This student has eloquently described the heart of syntonic isolation within a syntonic intimacy relationship. Feeling good and functioning well with and without a romantic other: everyone benefits.

In the following excerpt, we gain insight into one student's experience of syntonic isolation while in a LDR. The student writes to her former self from her present self describing what she learned through her lived experience to establish syntonic isolation when in a long distance relationship:

> You are your own person. Just because David is gone for the summer does not mean your life stops, it will be a bit of an adjustment but your life will adjust.

> Start slow, start by being independent and doing things you love to do. You have a great job lined up for the summer, working with children in a fun setting. Start putting some of the concepts you have learned in school, into practice by teaching kids in a fun way. Running is another hobby you can start doing again. Start training for the half marathon, it means you are doing something for yourself, to better your life. These two things alone will keep you extremely busy throughout the summer (Paper 18).

The intentional focus upon things that were important to her and activities wherein she felt a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment were pivotal to her sense of syntonic isolation within a committed, romantic, LDR. In other words, being able to focus upon other things and people in her world (and not only upon her partner), while her partner lived away from her, helped her to maintain a sense of syntonic isolation.

Another young woman, discussing her pride at feeling good and functioning well when in a committed, romantic, LDR, stated:

> At one time, I was not able to do that [feel good being alone]. I am extremely fortunate to be in the place I am now and am thankful every day that I am. Without a shadow of a doubt, I am happier now than I have ever been before in my life; I truly am being true to who I am for the very first time (Paper 20).

Syntonic isolation is poignantly expressed in her declaration. The happiness she enjoyed seems to have come from learning to be true to herself, and as she declared, for the first time in her life. Long distance relationships create additional challenges for young adults in romantic, intimate relationships, and those who are able to navigate these challenges

while maintaining self-focus and care, seem to be more likely to experience syntonic isolation, as well.

Intimacy (IN)

In this dissertation I purport that the psychosocial developmental process of intimacy consists of two dimensions: dystonic and syntonic.

Dystonic intimacy (DIN). The following was the operational definition used during deductive content analysis: Dystonic intimacy (DIN) will provide description of feeling bad and functioning poorly when with the (a) romantic other.

The third dimension, dystonic intimacy, consists of description of students' experiences when in romantic, intimate relationships. There was a range in the description of dystonic intimacy found in the autobiographical narratives. The greatest amount of text in student narratives was attributed to the description of dystonic intimacy in the process of developing intimate relationships.

Often, the desire to be in a romantic, intimate relationship can be so strong that at times individuals do not follow their gut feelings, but instead proceed into a relationship even with important questions left unanswered:

> I tried asking about his past relationships, because I knew pretty much nothing about them, but he would always tell me that it was none of my business. I probably should have been a little suspicious right then and there, but I was so in love with the way he made me feel that I just brushed it off of my shoulder and let it sit in the back of my mind. I was too afraid of losing him (Paper 2).

Dystonic intimacy can be seen in the young woman's declaration that although she had concerns she did not address those concerns directly. Often in retrospect, student paper-writers recognized that they stepped over something in order to have the immediacy of the present moment.

The student who provided this next quote finished her last year of high school having maintained a LDR with her romantic other while he was away at college. After arriving on campus and being in close physical proximity to one another, her hopes and dreams for intimacy were shattered:

> Once we arrived at the University, I noticed that John was becoming less and less interested in me sexually. This had started to develop over the summer and it hurt. I tried to ignore it, but it bothered me more as time went by here at school. I repeatedly tried to make John attracted to me again. I tried throwing myself at him, changing my wardrobe, wearing more makeup, ignoring it, initiating intimacy, complaining, crying…basically you name it and I probably tried it. John responded to all of these tactics by assuring me that he was attracted to me and he didn't know what was going on (Paper 14).

Dystonic intimacy is made clear in the above narrative. This student fantasized that their time together would be uninterrupted, that they both would feel good and function well together – but this did not happen as she anticipated – and she was devastated. All of the papers analyzed contained some description of dystonic intimacy.

Numerous young adult females, when discussing their first intimate relationships, referred to those formed in their adolescence. When describing their first sexual

experience, students used a range of description that a reader might classify from mild to severe, depicting dystonic intimacy. In the narrative depiction that follows, a female student describes the scene:

> We finished visiting at Bob's uncle's house and after dinner, we went back to Bob's house. After talking about how the night went, we ended up making out. I later lost my virginity that night but it was awful because I had not yet learned what I liked and didn't like – something that our professor claims is crucial to communicate in a sexual relationship. To top it all off, the song "Dirty Little Secret" by the All-American Rejects was on the radio in the background. I still laugh at the irony of my life sometimes (Paper 19).

Even though experiencing dystonic intimacy, she continued on in the relationship, hoping for things to get better. Things did not get better and she eventually ended the relationship.

From student accounts it became clear that engaging in sexual relations with romantic others often began in adolescence. When the sexual interaction was viewed as hurtful to the student, great angst, confusion, and damaged self-esteem accompanied these narratives. Keeping in mind that these narratives were autobiographical and each student made choices about what to share and what not to share, there may have been other experiences of early sexual engagement that were not discussed. For example, some adolescents while exploring their sexuality may have had developmentally enhancing experiences, yet none of the narratives provided for this study described syntonic intimacy when describing first sexual intercourse in adolescence. Their narrative

depictions were exclusively of dystonic intimacy when describing early sexual intercourse.

The strength of desire to be in an intimate relationship varies from individual to individual, for some it seemed to be a guiding force. The following student talked about her memory of her earliest thoughts about developing intimate relationships:

> Ever since I can remember, I have longed to have a boyfriend. My romantic background is extensive and has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. By taking this course, I now understand that my constant obsession with wanting to be around and close to others is extremely natural. This is comforting to me because I always felt as though I was "too boy-crazy" and was irrational for desiring the companionship of a boyfriend. In fact, I even went so far as to conclude at a very young age that I would only be happy once I had a boyfriend. This led me to go on the prowl extremely early on, and in 5th grade, I set out to find myself a man (Paper 14).

For this student, her self-described obsession with seeking constant contact with others seemed to fuel her drive to seek relationships with romantic others from an early age. Paired with her experiences of dystonic isolation the experience of dystonic intimacy was pervasive in her narrative.

Often undergraduate students are in relationships with romantic others attending a different university, or one of the partners is older and further along on the educational or professional path. Still others have left partners who are still in high school and/or not pursuing college. These variations in LDRs increase the already challenging process of

developing intimate relationships. Navigating distance in an intimate relationship can be an opportunity for growth and to strengthen the relationship through intentional actions. However, at other times, the stress of an LDR leads to dystonic intimacy. Being in an LDR often dominated by dystonic intimacy; the following student described how she and her partner experienced the end of their relationship:

> A month into my college experience, I did not want to do the long-distance relationship thing anymore. I had been up to visit him once, and it seemed like we fought a lot. He came down to visit me, and that's when I had to end it. He stayed the weekend down here, but I broke up with him on Saturday. We spent the entire day in bed crying and trying to figure out some way to work it out, but we came up with nothing. We kept touch some, until he decided to cut off all communication completely. He deleted me off Facebook, Xbox Live, everything (Paper 11).

This narrative suggests that for contemporary young adults, intimate relationships are sometimes developed, and frequently maintained, through current social media mediums, such as Facebook, Xbox, etc. This means that the beginnings and endings of intimate relationships for young adults can be made very public – adding another dimension to the experience of developing intimate relationships for contemporary young adults.

Syntonic intimacy (SIN). The following operational definition was used during deductive content analysis: Syntonic intimacy (SIN) will provide description of feeling good and functioning well when with the (a) romantic other.

Narrative depictions of students' experiences of syntonic intimacy when in romantic, intimate relationships comprised the third greatest amount of narrative, compared to the other three dimensions. When student narratives were coded as syntonic intimacy, they did not write as frequently or with as much range in description as they wrote about dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy, but they did provide examples of what they felt helped them to experience greater levels of syntonic intimacy.

Thinking about students' narratives from the lens of psychosocial development in young adulthood, it seems evident that the desired outcome of this stage is to obtain syntonic intimacy, feeling good and functioning well when with the romantic other. It appears, however, that in the development of intimate relationships young adults, in their search for syntonic intimacy, experience a wide range of developmental processes – from dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy to syntonic isolation and syntonic intimacy – all with the end goal of obtaining a happy and well-functioning intimate relationship. Before addressing the psychosocial developmental process to seek adaptive balance involving two or more of these four dimensions, the following section will illustrate students' narrative depiction of the last of the four dimensions: syntonic intimacy.

The following narrative depicts a young woman at the end of the adolescence stage and edging into the young adulthood stage, during which time she met someone who became a romantic, intimate partner:

> The summer going into my senior year of high school I began developing feelings for Paul after he was diagnosed with mono and I was grounded and not allowed to leave my house. Since we were both fairly restricted, he would come over to my

> house to see me so I wasn't bored and we would watch movies together. After I became more comfortable with him, Paul began opening up to me and I realized I was beginning to like him, a lot. We began spending more and more time together and eventually became completely infatuated with the other one, spending almost every day together. It was the first time I fell in love (Paper 14).

As this student spent more time with her romantic other and experienced syntonic intimacy she wanted to spend even greater amounts of time with him, and eventually that meant that she fell in love for the first time.

In another young woman's narrative she described the first time she met the young man who would become her romantic, intimate partner:

> The minute that I saw Taylor there was an immediate fascination that I had with him. It's hard to explain but for the five months that I was single, I hadn't once felt what I felt when Taylor introduced himself on the first night of spring break. I just wanted to get to know him and all I could think about was how excited I was that I got to spend the next seven days with him. On one of our last nights there the University baseball team was playing at our local stadium for spring training. It wasn't meant to be a date but when everyone else bailed out, Taylor and I were the only ones that ended up going and I was content with that. During the game, we shared stories of our families, talked about sports and everything in between. But no matter what we talked about, I wanted to know more and spend more time with him (Paper 17).

After being in close proximity and talking together, she desired to get to know him better. The notion of feeling good and functioning well when with the romantic other is present in this depiction of her first encounter with Taylor – one that led to seeking greater amounts of time together and the development of a romantic, intimate relationship.

In the following set of quotes, the most notable pattern when students wrote about their long distance relationships is that they described what they do to increase the likelihood of syntonic intimacy while experiencing geographic distance from one another. It appears that, for those who had moved from proximal intimate relationships where the question of commitment to one another was answered in the affirmative, people found ways to maintain syntonic intimacy despite being physically apart.

> I coped with the situation by constantly staying in communication with John, via phone, text messaging and Skype. Skype was an interesting tool that we used to stay in communication. I didn't stop smiling for about a half an hour the first time I skyped with John, it was so exciting to be able to see his face. At the same time, it was disappointing and difficult to skype with him because it was like "holding a treat in front of a dog." Whenever I would see his face I wanted so badly to be able to touch him. We also coped by surprising each other with letters and care packages. The letters were romantic and kept us on our toes. By maintaining the spark and passion, we were avoiding letting commuting get old (Paper 14).

The sense of syntonic intimacy is readily discernable in this young adult's narrative about the LDR with her romantic, intimate other. Utilizing electronic ways of engaging in communication (i.e., text and phone calls) is just one example of how young adults in the

study navigated the challenges of physical distance during their long distance, romantic, intimate relationships. The core theme of trust is palpable throughout the narrative as she highlights mutuality in their relationship. Notably, this trust is both at an individual level and at the couple level.

The duality of trust at the individual level and the couple level was depicted best in a formula presented by the professor of this intimate relationships course. Throughout student narratives, when they wrote about how they viewed their desired intimate relationship, they quoted the formula, 1+1= 2. This simple formula makes explicit that each partner (1 and 1) in an intimate relationship must always remain singular while a part of a coupled (2) romantic, intimate relationship. This is the heart of syntonic isolation and syntonic intimacy working together. This is expressed in the following young adult's narrative:

> Our professor said 1+1=1 is not true, it must always equal two. Each person in a relationship must be self-focused and authentic with their partner. Each individual needs to be nurtured along with the relationship. Each partner must understand the others' love and attachment styles to be able to best nurture each other and the relationship. Each person must be held accountable and hold the other accountable as well. With this and authentic communication almost any problem within a couple can be resolved as long as each is civil and is always considering the other (Paper 6).

Speaking with wisdom gained from her engagement in the development of a romantic, intimate relationship, and a simple equation (1+1=2) learned from her professor, this

student demonstrated her understanding that to obtain the desired syntonic intimacy with a romantic other (2), one must begin with and maintain the relationship through syntonic isolation (1).

In the following excerpt, this student talked about his relationship with his romantic, intimate other and discussed why he felt their relationship worked:

> We, as an intimate partnership are able to love each other because of our faults, weaknesses or even inadequacies not despite them. We also have our fair share of downfalls regarding our own intimate relationship with one another, but each of us is aware of them and more than willing to work at them in order to create a more successful relationship in the end. I feel I am able to be exactly who I am while with Johnny. Not only do I know that I am finally able to sit back, relax, and fully enjoy his company but I know Johnny feels similarly (Paper 20).

Evident in this narrative is his sense of safety in being his authentic self with his partner. It appears that to come to this place of authenticity they had experienced times of vulnerability which led them to deep feelings of syntonic intimacy. The sense of feeling good and functioning well when with the romantic other is poignantly expressed in his narrative.

In the next section, the psychosocial developmental process of seeking adaptive balance among the dimensions of isolation and intimacy will be further explored and demonstrated through student narratives.

Phase II: Seeking Adaptive Balance

Analyses conducted in Phase II were focused upon the proposition that psychosocial development in the young adulthood stage involves seeking adaptive balance between or among the four dimensions in this study. In this dissertation I purport that the process to seek adaptive balance (i.e., specifically in the development of romantic intimate relationships in the young adulthood stage) occurs through interactions with romantic others in one's social world.

As young adults may encounter numerous potential romantic others, and interact directly with several romantic others, adaptive balance is viewed as always in flux, potentially adapting to different romantic others, as well as varying social, contextual changes, requiring adaptation with the social world. Even in those times when a dystonic pairing (DIS-DIN) dominates one person's experience in a relationship, this can be viewed as an effort to fit into the social situation at the time while attempting to develop an intimate relationship.

In the narrative examples selected in Phase II of this dissertation, adaptive balance may be seen in an individual's movement from one of the four dimensions to one other of the dimensions. It may also be seen in movement from a pairing of dimensions to one other dimension, and in some cases being able to track this adaptive balance among all four of the dimensions. In this way of viewing psychosocial development, adaptive balance is never fixed or finally achieved. Student narratives provide us a glimpse into the interactive world of psychosocial development; an always evolving and changing response to the social context of romantic, intimate relationships.

Summary of Findings

Three main findings resulted from content analysis in Phase II. Student autobiographical narratives contained patterns depicting: (1) pairing of dimensions, (2) seeking adaptive balance between two dimensions, and (3) seeking adaptive balance among all dimensions.

Pairing of Dimensions

A finding that was not previously theorized but was nevertheless evident was the pairing of dimensions in descriptions depicting the development of intimate relationships. That is, when dystonic isolation was described, dystonic intimacy was also described. In similar method, description of syntonic isolation was paired with description of syntonic intimacy.

Dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy pairing (DIS-DIN). In the following passage, this student's depiction of her dystonic intimate relationship (DIN) can readily be seen in her opening words. Later in the passage she admits to her fear of losing her partner, demonstrating dystonic isolation (DIS). These statements together in her narrative show that the experience of dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy may plausibly be paired:

> It was a destructive and dysfunctional relationship. He would make me cry, he would make me feel worthless and useless, and within the next moment he would make me feel special…Did I ever stand back and consider what was happening? What he was doing, denying we had an actual relationship, was it cheating? These thoughts were in the back of my mind but I was too afraid to lose him, too afraid

> to be consumed by the loneliness that I'd felt before I'd met him…I was definitely given multiple chances to leave and save myself from future inflictions of emotional pain but I chose to stay. I was always clouded with thoughts about what to say about what we were, how we felt, and what he was doing to our relationship, but I was so afraid of being alone and being rejected that I never said a word (Paper 5).

Her fear of being without him indicates dystonic isolation (DIS), while the interactions in her intimate relationship depict dystonic intimacy (DIN). The pairing of these two dimensions within a romantic, intimate relationship may help us to understand the difficulty many young adults experience leaving relationships that are not healthy for them. For example, feeling bad and functioning poorly when without the romantic other (dystonic isolation) combined with feeling bad and functioning poorly when with the romantic other (dystonic intimacy) may leave one feeling confused or stuck, wondering how or if it would ever be possible to feel good and function well alone and/or in an intimate relationship.

Syntonic isolation and syntonic intimacy pairing (SIS-SIN). Syntonic isolation and syntonic intimacy depictions were often paired. That is, in narratives depicting syntonic isolation, syntonic intimacy was frequently described as well. The following student, in describing her hopeful anticipation of a future intimate relationship, indicated her awareness that she must first be self-focused without a partner (SIS) as she seeks an intimate relationship (SIN). The paired descriptions of syntonic isolation and the anticipation of future syntonic intimacy are evident in the following narrative:

> I relish in the metaphor of a relationship being sort of like a workshop. My goal for this workshop is to find an individual who wants to live within my working and changing phases, and is able to tolerate my insecurities while I work on them. Ultimately, have them want to take this journey with me through self-reflection and growing. Before all of this happens though, I need to be secure in myself. Confidence is attractive. I tend to find men attracted to me when I am not really trying very hard. I am sure that sounds silly but it is the truth. Just being me will be a turn on to someone, somewhere. The first person on my list, for right now, is me. Once that item on the agenda becomes more solidified, then and only then will I bring someone else on board to this crazy ship that is me (Paper 10).

A major theme that ran throughout all papers was the notion of syntonic isolation, and its pairing with syntonic intimacy. In student narratives, it appeared that some students had arrived at this experience for themselves and often credited their engagement in the course for this outcome. Still others described experiencing this with their romantic others, but not all. While describing their desired future intimate relationships, the majority of students indicated their awareness that the main focus in the development of intimate relationships must first be upon one's self.

Seeking Adaptive Balance between Two Dimensions

In the next section, psychosocial development in the young adulthood stage is seen in the movement from one dimension to one other dimension in the process to develop of intimate relationships.

Dystonic isolation to syntonic isolation (DIS to SIS). The first of the developmental processes observed as a pattern within student narratives depicts the psychosocial adaptive process to move from dystonic isolation (DIS) to syntonic isolation (SIS):

> I realize now that I was desperate to escape the numbness I was feeling, to experience the sweetness of love again, but most of all to understand who I am, who I was, and who I could become. Closing off my heart stunted the growth of my experience in intimate relationships and disabled my ability to be with someone who could have helped me experience greater happiness…but I now know not to let the past poison my future and what is to come. If I am to say what it is that I regret the most, it is definitely closing off my heart when I should have been opening it…now I know better. If I was terribly burned before, I now have been reborn from the ashes of my past to experience the new, to live the new and with the knowledge of the old, become a better person to love and be loved (Paper 5).

This young woman made it clear that she made a developmental shift away from dystonic isolation and toward syntonic isolation in her desire to know herself. This narrative depiction gives credibility to the psychosocial desire to develop and grow in the young adulthood stage, wherein the ego-strength of isolation can be experienced as both dystonic and syntonic during the development of intimate relationships.

Dystonic isolation to syntonic intimacy (DIS to SIN). The next developmental process observed depicts the psychosocial process of movement from dystonic isolation

(DIS) to syntonic intimacy (SIN). Often when students wrote about their experiences labeled as dystonic isolation in this dissertation, it was accompanied by a desire to somehow obtain the long sought for, but often elusive, experience of syntonic intimacy. In the following passage a young woman, after having made it through a LDR, described her transition to being with her loved one once again:

> I remember becoming paranoid that something had happened. Had we lost what we had? Did he find someone else? I asked myself all the questions wondering why it felt this way. My stress soon went away as we began to readjust to each other. Things started to go back to normal slowly as we both began to rearrange to the change of being proximally back together. I realized that we just had to give it time, because we had changed our day-to-day lives completely for the last month and a half (Paper 6).

Transitioning from a LDR to a proximal relationship with her romantic, intimate partner created a context for her to experience developmental growth from dystonic isolation to syntonic intimacy. In her declaration that things started to go back to normal, she attested to this process in the building of intimate relationships.

Dystonic intimacy to syntonic isolation (DIN to SIS). At yet other times in the young adulthood stage and during the development of intimate relationships, for some of the paper-writers the process moved from dystonic intimacy to seeking syntonic isolation. In the following passage a young woman articulated her experience of dystonic intimacy which led her to want something different for herself. Rather than reaching immediately

for the next intimate relationship she depicted a developmental process to seek what would be labeled in this dissertation as syntonic isolation

> I realized that Matt made me feel like crap when we were dating. The most difficult part to come to terms with is that I did not recognize it while it was occurring! This person that I had so much respect for was being shown in his true colors for the first time, and that is one of the best things that ever happened to me. I figured out that he put me down a lot and made me feel as though I was not as intelligent of a person as him…I discovered within myself the strength to turn away from his hurtful tactics and begin a new path towards appreciating what I have and appreciating myself for who I am. I have found peace in who I am as a person from this particular experience, and know that I am valuable, and especially, that I am loved (Paper 10).

Syntonic isolation is a central psychosocial developmental process viewed in this dissertation as integral to development in contemporary young adulthood, where intimate relationships may often be serial monogamous relationships. Having experienced a difficult relationship (DIN), this student sought adaptive balance by turning her focus upon herself (SIS).

Dystonic intimacy to syntonic intimacy (DIN to SIN). In the process of building intimate relationships, young adults described a wide range of developmental experiences. As sexuality became a very real part of intimate relationships, the process to seek adaptive balance among the dimensions of this stage became more evident. In the following excerpt, a student narrated her experience of moving from an earlier experience

of dystonic intimacy into a newly developing syntonic intimacy relationship, one in which she felt good, and functioned well with her romantic, intimate partner:

> Despite my actions, my sexual values have always been that sex should be within a committed relationship, shared between only two people, and preferably within marriage. However, I am a hypocrite to the large pieces of my ideal. Lee was a friend with benefits who would not enter a committed relationship with me outside of being reliable sex buddies. When I cleaned up my act and began a committed relationship with Randy, I assumed that because he had strong moral values from his Christianity, he and I would be capable of not going that far until marriage. Nevertheless, one romantic walk in the park and pent-up hormones unexpectedly changed that for Randy and me. Initially, I was terrified that entering into the sexual intimacy of our relationship would send us down the path that all of my past relationships had fallen down and lead to breaking up. Thanks to our opening up in communication about our thoughts on this new step in our love life together, the two of us were capable of mending and configuring how we would approach our relationship now (Paper 4).

From this young woman's self-disclosure, we can recognize the developmental process of moving from dystonic intimacy to syntonic intimacy. Carrying with her memories of dystonic intimacy experiences from her past relationships (DIN), she feared problems in her current intimate relationship. Her move to syntonic intimacy is made evident in her declaration that communication helped her and her partner to find solutions and be

purposeful in their relationship (SIN).

Seeking Adaptive Balance among Dimensions

As the previous narrative depictions helped us to understand, engagement in intimate relationships involves a wide range of psychosocial development. Experiences may range from times of paired dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy or syntonic isolation and syntonic intimacy, to still other times when the experience of transitioning from an LDR to a proximal relationship helps to facilitate movement from dystonic intimacy to a syntonic intimacy. In these personal narrative depictions, we gain access into the world of psychosocial development in the young adulthood stage – it is evident that this is a very active, and evolving developmental stage: seeking adaptive balance.

In the following section, narratives describing active engagement in the development of intimate relationships depict seeking adaptive balance by moving among three or four of the dimensions in this stage: dystonic isolation (DIS), syntonic isolation (SIS), dystonic intimacy (DIN), and syntonic intimacy (SIN).

Dystonic isolation-dystonic intimacy pairing to syntonic isolation (DIS-DIN to SIS). A common theme found in student narratives about the development of their intimate relationships was about attempting to do something, anything, to try to fix a romantic intimate relationship that was dystonic by focusing on changing themselves for the romantic other. In this narrative the student moved beyond the paired experience of dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy (DIS-DIN) to syntonic isolation (SIS):

> I will always remember how the person I was in love with yelled at me that he will never be attracted to me enough to date me again; how he cheated on me and

> bashed my personality, but congratulated my physicality. I always concentrated on changing myself to change the situation or to come up with something brilliant enough to open his eyes and change his mind about our relationship or his feelings toward me, but all my attempts were futile, trying to make 'us' right. Finally, I was done dealing with the constant rejection. I made a personal resolve, mentally packed my bags, said my final words, and walked out the door on that emotional train wreck. Tension and stress from anticipating the loss of connectedness and emotional memoires of being rejected and left for other girls were no longer going to govern my life. Once it was all said and done, I reflected on my life and got back to concentrating entirely on tending to my '1' to become fully healthy and happy again (Paper 10).

The majority of narrative depiction in the papers analyzed for this dissertation contained lengthy passages of dystonic intimacy and dystonic isolation pairings. The two processes seem to go together. This student provided poignant description of the dystonic isolation-dystonic intimacy pairing, and further, evidence of the developmental process to seek adaptive balance is seen in her turn toward syntonic isolation. She declared that she was moving on from the relationship. What she turned toward was greater self-focused care without depending upon an intimate partner (SIS).

Dystonic intimacy-dystonic isolation pairing to syntonic intimacy (DIN-DIS to SIN). Students who wrote about the depths of their personal struggles to achieve syntonic intimacy often shared their process to move from dystonic isolation-dystonic intimacy pairing to the possibility of achieving syntonic intimacy. The next young

woman revealed that she managed her anxiety in relationships by always being in control of her emotions and having the upper-hand. She demonstrated her turn away from dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy toward syntonic intimacy by the things she was willing to do to make herself more emotionally available to her partner. She stated:

> To face my fears, I want to learn how to feel out of control in my relationships. I want to communicate openly with my partner about my control issues and hopefully he will be patient with me as I learn to lose control…I will also see less fighting in my relationships as a result and I should start to feel better about myself. I know this will be really hard for me but I really believe that small changes can lead to big changes in my relationships. I know that if I am actively trying to better my relationships, I can overcome my tendency to let my attachment and love styles dictate my relationships. I also want to learn to let people take care of me. I want to let myself be influenced by my partner and the relationship because I know that a deep connection with someone cannot be established if I do not open up in that way. This class has helped me realize that there will be no growth without some risk-taking. Risk-taking, for me, is very complex as I am not naturally a risk-taker but I think if I push myself a little bit out of my comfort zone I will see positive results (Paper 7).

We can see in this narrative the young woman's developmental movement from a lifetime of experiencing dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy (DIS-DIN) to her desire to experience greater, more authentic intimacy in her romantic, intimate relationship (SIN). As she described her personal actions in the development of her intimate

relationships, we witness the developmental process of seeking adaptive balance among three of the dimensions in this stage.

Dystonic isolation to syntonic isolation-syntonic intimacy pairing (DIS to SIS-SIN). Moving away from a prevalent experience of dystonic isolation in her life (DIS), the next young woman demonstrated her awareness that a journey toward self-focus and care (SIS) is imperative within her romantic, intimate relationship (SIN).

> In order to break these patterns of jealousy and other-focus, I need to start a journey of self-focus. My current relationship allows me the freedom to maintain my own friendships, dreams, and goals, but my need for intimacy has caused me to put my other relationships aside in order to focus solely on my relationship. I now understand that in order to better my relationship, I need to better myself. It is important to find confidence, self-worth, and purpose on your own. Nobody else can be responsible for filling some void in you. Jack has said in the past that it is his job to make me happy, and I tell him that is completely false. Having a loving relationship with someone else can only work if you can love yourself first. You can't expect someone to accept and love you unconditionally if you don't love yourself first. Thinking of yourself as an independent whole, rather than half of a person looking for your other half, is crucial for relationship satisfaction and sustainability over time (Paper 3).

This young woman has captured the meaning of the syntonic isolation-syntonic intimacy pairing, making it clear that one must tend to the care of one's self while also working to develop the desired syntonic intimacy. In this depiction we witness adaptive balance:

seeking to move from previous experiences of DIS toward the desired SIS and SIN pairing.

Dystonic intimacy to syntonic intimacy-syntonic isolation pairing (DIN to SIN-SIS). Another developmental process observed was the movement from dystonic intimacy to the syntonic intimacy-syntonic isolation pairing. In the following excerpt, this student brings attention to a common experience described by students who are in committed, romantic intimate relationships – having problems (DIN). She then focuses on the importance of developing syntonic isolation (SIS) within her syntonic intimacy relationship (SIN).

> Darren and I have had our problems, we are still dealing with many, but in the end we know we love each other. Because we are willing to work on these problems together instead of just ending the relationship, I know that we can last a long time if we want to. Hopefully everything works out in the future; if not, then I think we are both independent enough individuals to continue living our lives. We would be sad of course, but as Mendenhall says, '1+1=2'. Since we are comfortable with ourselves as individuals, we can maintain a happy and healthy relationship (Paper 11).

Developing a strong sense of self, or experiencing syntonic isolation, is conceptualized as a key dimension in the young adulthood stage. In this young woman's final declaration, she depicted each of them as being comfortable as individuals (SIS); she paired this with her experience as being part of a happy relationship (SIN). Her declaration succinctly depicts the syntonic isolation-syntonic intimacy pairing (SIS-SIN).

Dystonic intimacy-dystonic isolation paring to syntonic isolation and possible syntonic intimacy (DIN-DIS to SIS-SIN). Throughout these personal narratives, students peeled back the proverbial curtain, to expose the depths of the impact of dystonic isolation upon the development of their intimate relationships. The following woman described her weariness with conforming to the status quo in her relationships (DIN) and went on to divulge the depths of her experience of dystonic isolation (DIS). Beyond this, she described her personal developmental process to seek adaptive balance, that is, to begin to develop syntonic isolation (SIS) in hopes that this will lead to syntonic intimacy (SIN) with her partner.

> My resistance to change has been sabotaging my relationships. Sticking with the status quo leaves me feeling lonely when all my work is done and my partner is no longer willing and/or able to talk. I do not think there is anything wrong with being independent, but I think I do need to learn to recognize when my need for independence is sabotaging the relationship. In my past, I have taken my need to the extreme and thus have made it virtually impossible for anyone to get close to me. This often leaves me feeling lonely and defeated in my relationships. I am sick of feeling these ways and know that in order to start feeling satisfied in my relationships, I am going to have to make changes and realize when my need for independence is becoming overbearing and straining my relationships (Paper 7).

The desire for intimacy with a romantic other that is satisfying to her, a relationship where she can move beyond her constant experience of dystonic isolation and into a mutual experience of syntonic intimacy, is such a powerful developmental force that she

knew she needed to be the agent of change in her own life. With this awareness, and newly gained tools from her intimate relationship course, this young woman showed determination to move through the developmental process of this stage: seeking adaptive balance. By taking actions which were self-focused (SIS) she increased the likelihood of experiencing syntonic intimacy (SIN) in her next romantic, intimate relationship.

Chapter 5: Discussion

A major and central finding of this dissertation was the identification of the four proposed dimensions in student narratives. This finding differs from Eriksonian theory by expanding from a two dimensional model to four, thereby shifting the notion of the dynamic balance of opposites to a view of psychosocial development as seeking adaptive balance among four dimensions. In this model, isolation and intimacy are separate and concomitant processes, each with two dimensions (DIS, SIS, DIN, and SIN).

In Phase II, adaptive balance was made evident in student narratives depicting this process between the dimensions of DIS and SIS, and between DIN and SIN. Additionally, the process of pairing dimensions (DIS and DIN) and (SIS and SIN) was identified through analysis. Finally, the process to seek adaptive balance among three or four dimensions was another theme revealed (i.e., DIS-DIN to SIS-SIN). This discussion will address each of the five findings, how they compare to previous Eriksonian findings, identify contributions to the field, limitations, and future directions.

Finding 1. Isolation (IS) and intimacy (IN) are two separate psychosocial processes occurring concomitantly. The dimensions of isolation and intimacy were both identified within student autobiographical papers. This finding both supports and challenges Eriksonian theory. Erikson's (1950) model first named the stage intimacy verses isolation. Yufit (1956) and others (Orlofsky, Marcia, & Lesser, 1973) later specified types of individuals: preintimates, intimates and isolates, thereby extending the two dimensional model. While this dissertation supports the presence of the two dimensions, isolation and intimacy, it differs from previous studies by identifying a four

dimensional model of psychosocial development, and by not assigning traits to individuals or categorizing them as types.

Adaptive balance. In this dissertation I purport that adaptive balance is an interactive process engaged in by an individual with his/her social world; specifically with romantic intimate others in the development of intimate relationships in the young adulthood stage. This view differs from Eriksonian perspectives of the 1980s when Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick (1986) purported what they called the dynamic balance of opposites, maintaining that isolation and intimacy were polar opposites in a dichotomous view of psychosocial development in young adulthood. The current dissertation departs from this view by demonstrating that while isolation and intimacy are both present in this stage, they are further expanded to include both dystonic and syntonic dimensions for each, resulting in a four dimensional model.

Concomitant isolation and intimacy processes. The current study joins in supporting the notion that the young adulthood stage is the optimal time for the development of intimate relationships, and that during this stage the processes of isolation and intimacy are central. However, in this dissertation my view departs from Eriksonian theory by demonstrating that isolation and intimacy are concomitant processes. These processes are viewed as separate but occurring together in young adulthood, and they are not considered polar opposites as formerly described. Further, the notion of psychosocial development as being ordered, or staged, is most clearly seen in studies devoted to identity development in adolescence. This may be because identity is a central feature of Erikson's model and has been the Eriksonian stage most often studied.

Importantly, numerous 21st century studies support the link between identity development and the development of intimacy (e.g., Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Mackinnon et al., 2011; Pittman et al., 2011; Seginer & Noyman, 2005; and Sneed et al., 2012). This dissertation both supports and expands upon these studies by demonstrating that isolation and intimacy are two separate and concomitant psychosocial processes, and furthermore, expands the model to include four dimensions.

Overlapping stages. The finding that dystonic and syntonic dimensions of both isolation and intimacy are present in student narratives may indicate that aspects of the identity developmental process of the adolescent stage continue on into the young adulthood stage. This is consistent with emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000) which argues that the onset of adulthood is prolonged in Western society due to the fact that (among other reasons) young adults are engaged in longer and longer periods of time pursuing college education and career preparation. Numerous narratives provided by students described their first intimate relationships as beginning in adolescence and the search for intimate relationships continuing on into young adulthood. In contemporary societal context it is common to witness the development of intimate relationships in early adolescence, while at the same time developing a sense of identity is expanded further into the young adulthood stage. This sense of overlap between Eriksonian stages was strongly evident in the narratives analyzed for this dissertation.

Finding 2. There are four dimensions in the psychosocial process to seek adaptive balance between isolation (IS) and intimacy (IN): dystonic isolation (DIS), syntonic isolation (SIS), dystonic intimacy (DIN) and syntonic intimacy (SIN). This

dissertation differs from other studies conducted on the isolation and intimacy stage by shifting the focus away from intimacy as the desired goal for this stage, to placing equal value on all four dimensions. A finding of this dissertation is that, in the process of seeking adaptive balance, all dimensions are integral to the developmental process of this stage. Individuals need to navigate their unique psychosocial developmental processes as they engage in the development of romantic intimate relationships in the young adulthood stage.

An expanded four dimensional model. The present work supports the Erikson et al.'s (1986) and Waterman's (2012) view of dimensions in the young adulthood stage as dystonic and syntonic. However, in this dissertation I depart from the Eriksonian view in its demonstration of four dimensions. In previous views of dystonic and syntonic dimensions only two dimensions were identified in the young adulthood stage; isolation was considered dystonic while intimacy was considered syntonic. The current research demonstrated that isolation, once viewed only as dystonic, can now be viewed as syntonic (i.e., syntonic isolation) as well. And intimacy, which has historically been viewed as syntonic, now can be viewed as containing a dystonic dimension (i.e., dystonic intimacy). In this dissertation I purported and identified four dimensions in the young adulthood stage: dystonic isolation (DIS), syntonic isolation (SIS), dystonic intimacy (DIN), and syntonic intimacy (SIN).

Finding 3. Student autobiographical narratives contain depiction of the processes to seek adaptive balance between (1) dystonic isolation and syntonic isolation (DIS and SIS) and (2) dystonic intimacy and syntonic intimacy (SIN and

SIN) in the young adulthood developmental stage. This finding supports original Eriksonian views of the young adulthood stage by identifying a pattern to seek adaptive balance between dystonic isolation (DIS) and syntonic intimacy (DIN). Whereas the Eriksonian view of psychosocial development in the young adulthood stage favors moving from dystonic isolation (DIS) to syntonic intimacy (SIN), the findings of my dissertation identified numerous additional combinations amongst the four dimensions. My view of balance as adaptive and the findings of four dimensions in this dissertation suggest that the former view of balance as dichotomous no longer adequately captures the complexity of psychosocial development in the young adulthood stage.

Student initiated psychosocial development. The finding that the process to seek adaptive balance between DIS and SIS, as well as between DIN and SIN, was supported demonstrates an important aspect of psychosocial development in the young adulthood stage. That is, in student narratives depicting movement from one dimension to another, the movement seemed to result from intentional development (or conscious awareness) on the part of the student writer. Students who were unhappy with their experiences of dystonic intimacy (DIN) were often motivated to seek syntonic intimacy (SIN). Additionally, students who described feeling bad and functioning poorly without a romantic other (DIS) were noted to seek ways to feel and function better (SIS). My view in this dissertation is that the process of adaptive balance is always in flux as young adults interact with others in their social world. The narratives analyzed were from students who were intentional in their attempt to understand their intimate relationships (i.e., by participating in an intimate relationships course and writing autobiographical

papers about themselves and their intimate relationships). Others engaged purposefully to change the direction of their intimate relationships (i.e., by leaving dystonic intimacy relationship and seeking to develop syntonic isolation before engaging in the next intimate relationship). In this sense, these young adults were all working toward adaptive balance.

Finding 4. A process of pairing dimensions was a theme identified during the analysis of student narratives depicting the development of intimate relationships. This finding, compared to previously conducted studies, breaks from the notion that only one of the dimensions (intimacy) is the desired outcome in the stage. A major pattern identified in this dissertation was the pairing of dimensions in student narratives. When dystonic isolation (DIS) was depicted, so also was dystonic intimacy (DIN). Similarly, when syntonic isolation (SIS) was described, along with it were depictions of syntonic intimacy (SIN). These pairings of dimensions in student narratives suggest that the psychosocial developmental processes of isolation and intimacy occur together (concomitantly) in the process of building intimate relationships, among four dimensions (not two).

Impact of paired dimensions on romantic intimate behavior. The desire to seek adaptive balance might take students into hard and difficult places as they try out relationships, ways of interaction, ways of problem solving, ways of thinking about themselves, and even relevant courses at the University. It may be that the pairing of dystonic dimensions (i.e., dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy) creates greater difficulty for young adults when considering whether to stay in or to leave a currently

dystonic intimacy relationship. For example, the pairing of DIS-DIN may leave one feeling confused or stuck, wondering how or if it would ever be possible to feel good and function well alone and/or in an intimate relationship. Conversely, it may also be that the pairing of SIS-SIN provides greater levels of feeling good and functioning well both when alone and when in an intimate relationship and thereby reinforces an individual's desire to continue on in the syntonic intimacy relationship. From student autobiographical narratives, it appears that most students found ways to move themselves through the dystonic paired dimensions (DIS-DIN), suggesting that this is a normal, or typical developmental process, and would not require intervention by others. However, in the event that an individual might find themselves stuck in both dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy, this may be a time for therapeutic consultation.

Finding 5. The developmental process to seek adaptive balance among three or four of the dimensions of the young adulthood stage was a theme identified during the analysis of student narratives depicting the development of intimate relationships. Identifying patterns in student narratives depicting complex processes to seek adaptive balance among three or four of the dimensions in this dissertation breaks from the Eriksonian view of a dynamic balance of opposites in the young adulthood stage. This finding suggests that students seek to develop in this direction, and that for them part of moving beyond adolescence is to develop self-attitudes, social skills, understandings of others, and determination to achieve adaptive balance in the process of developing intimate relationships so vital to this stage.

An always-changing adaptive process. Narrative depictions coded in this dissertation represent a kind of snapshot in developmental time for each of the student authors in this study. Consequently, narratives written or analyzed at other times would likely contain more and/or different combinations of the four dimensions within student autobiographical papers based upon each young adult's unique lived experiences. For example, as this stage focuses upon psychosocial interactions with romantic intimate others, if/as those others change in the student's social world, so also might the writer's experience of syntonic or dystonic isolation or intimacy, and their narrative descriptions as well. Student narratives analyzed for this dissertation depicted the four dimensional model theorized and demonstrated patterns to seek adaptive balance among all dimensions. This model helps to capture increased complexity in the young adulthood stage.

The findings of this study support the theorized four dimensional model and the process to seek adaptive balance during the development of intimate relationships in young adulthood. It is important to note that student narratives do not provide an explanation for how these processes occur, nor can we determine optimal levels based upon these data. Future work may help to identify and flesh out greater understanding of these processes.

A Changing Social Context Explanation

These findings are consistent with Erikson's view of psychosocial development as occurring within social context. It is my view that the broader social context for young adults in 2015 compared to young adults in 1950 has changed dramatically. Changes at

the societal and cultural levels directly impact psychosocial interactions for young adults in the development of their intimate relationships. Take for example, Westernized socially expected and gendered milestones in 1950, where young middle class women were expected to seek and secure a husband soon after 18 years of age and young middle class men, equally influenced by the expectations of the time, were expected to marry and prepare to procreate and raise children. In this social context, it makes good sense that Erikson would state that the development of intimate relationships would begin around 18 years of age and ideally result in marriage (i.e., likely considered to be an optimal context for the development of intimate relationships in the 1950s).

Contemporary society and romantic intimate relationships. Fast forward to the social context of the 21st century, where the development of romantic intimate relationships often begins in early adolescence and the establishment of a sense of identity extends long into the young adulthood stage. It is not difficult to conceptualize that the development of intimate relationships has become quite complex, in ways that differ from the complexity of the 1950s, considering the varied messages in today's social world that seem to encourage (maybe even expect?) adolescents and young adults to engage in romantic intimate relationships early on. Combine this with our societal expectations that young middle class adults obtain extensive higher education in pursuit of satisfying and financially rewarding careers, and we can appreciate how the development of romantic intimate relationships often becomes an experience of serial monogamy (and at times not monogamous).

Identity and intimacy in young adulthood. A sense of self, viewed by Erikson as identity, and the development of intimate relationships seem to go hand in hand during the young adulthood stage of the 21st century. It may be that isolation, rather than being the dynamic opposite of intimacy, is instead an aspect of identity. After all, to feel good and function well when not with a romantic intimate partner (syntonic isolation) suggests a strong sense of self (or identity).

To feel good and function well when with a romantic intimate partner (syntonic intimacy) has a ring to it that also suggests a strong sense of self (or identity) for the partners in a well-functioning and satisfying intimate relationship. Individual development of both partners may combine to make for a stronger, more functional relationship. At times, as was depicted in student narratives that also meant this led to a stronger, healthier break-up if either decided the relationship wasn't right for them. Given that the narratives provided for this study were autobiographical, we only witnessed one side of any couple relationship, but numerous students when describing their reasons for leaving relationships suggested that they grew stronger in their sense of self (syntonic isolation) which empowered them to leave relationships that did not work for them (dystonic intimacy).

Increased diversity and complexity in intimate relationships. Consistent with Erikson's view of psychosocial development as occurring within social context, a changing social world would, undoubtedly contribute to not only the range of experiences for young adults in the development of their intimate relationships, but also expand the range of psychosocial adaptation needed to interact with the social world and romantic,

intimate others in it. With a broader or more diverse range of more or less romantic relationships people might have lots more opportunity to work on psychosocial development.

It appears that Western societal attitudes about having multiple intimate relationships have changed quite dramatically from the 1950s to the 2000s. Marriage was encouraged and expected in the 1950s, while divorce was frowned upon and women, in particular, who were divorced, were stigmatized (Cherlin, 2005). Having multiple romantic intimate others was frowned upon for women of the time. In today's young adulthood it is more the norm to have multiple romantic intimate partners for both middle class men and women than it is to have just one partner or to be married during this stage primarily due to a greater range of options available to young adults. In particular, dual educated and dual career intimate relationships tend to result in marriage later in life than at previous times in history (Cherlin, 2005). The messages in Western society at large seem to focus upon the development of romantic intimate relationships apart from marriage and there appears to be more tolerance for multiple partners over time, divorce, being single, those who never marry, and GLBT relationships. Indeed, incorporating inclusive views of gender and sexuality are imperative in contemporary college classes focusing on the development of intimate relationships for young adults (Newell & Bohlinger, 2014).

Greater and greater amounts and range of diversity and complexity contribute to the social context for the development of romantic intimate relationships in the 2000s.

With this increased tolerance for diversity comes also increased complexity and opportunities for psychosocial development in contemporary young adulthood.

My four dimensional model, accounting for both dystonic and syntonic experiences in isolation and intimacy during the development of intimate relationships, can help us to better understand and potentially help young adults to navigate the complexity of this developmental stage. Taking the view that psychosocial development is adaptive and occurs in the interactions with others in the social world, most (if not all) of what was depicted in student narratives occurred without therapeutic intervention. It is notable however, that the desire to develop successful romantic intimate relationships was met by these students' active engagement in a University course on intimate relationships. Keeping this in mind, while psychosocial development occurs most often without direct intervention, access to education that encourages self-focus and care likely helped to facilitate student authors' insight into their own development.

Strengths and Limitations

The findings of this study are generated from descriptions of lived experiences in the development of romantic intimate relationships for young adult students, and therefore depict rich, thick description. A notable strength of this study is that the young adults attending this intimate relationships course were motivated to demonstrate their understanding of course concepts by writing about their lived-experiences in the development of intimate relationships. In the human sciences, according to Polkinghorne (1988), we come to understand the phenomenon under investigation by analyzing what people experiencing the phenomenon say about it. In my dissertation, young adult

students attending an intimate relationships course wrote autobiographical papers about their experiences in the development of their intimate relationships. This epistemological approach and level of analysis allows us to understand the phenomenon of developing romantic intimate relationships as young adults described it in their narratives.

As this is a small, qualitative narrative study it is not possible, nor was it the goal, to generalize these findings to all young adults. Because this study was conducted with students attending a course at a large Midwestern University focusing on the development of intimate relationships, there is no way to know the context for other young adult college students and whether their narratives would be similar or different than those analyzed for this study. Students embedded within a religious institution, for example, or attending a campus based in a rural community, might produce a different kind of final paper or be taught different content or with differing pedagogical methods. Indeed, young adults who do not attend a university, and who are embedded in environments where they might not have access to such a course on intimate relationships may or may not recount the same experiences described in this study. Future studies in different contextual settings will help to understand if these four dimensions would be present in other young adult narratives.

The mode of data collection unique to this study was possible because of the course's final project assignment, wherein students were mandated to write about the development of their intimate relationships and demonstrate that they understood course concepts. This contextual setting may likely have increased the motivation and the contextual knowledge of intimate relationships that contributed to the detailed narrative

descriptions provided in these narratives. Consequently, it cannot be assumed that all other young adults in the same developmental stage would produce the depths of description produced in these autobiographical papers.

Another limitation is that my dissertation only contains self-reports and I, as an observer and analyst, may see things differently than the student or another analyst might see in these same narratives. For example, using a different theoretical lens, these same narratives might be used to expound upon attachment theory, as some of Bowlby's ideas about attachment are similar to Erikson's ideas about trust, for example. Further, the students engaged in the writing of these narratives were not aware of or writing to describe the four theorized dimensions, and therefore, may or may not view these findings similarly with my view.

Future Directions

The findings of this study open up a new way of viewing psychosocial development in the young adulthood stage wherein the development of intimate relationships is central. The theoretical model of the four dimensions of dystonic isolation (DIS), syntonic isolation (SIS), dystonic intimacy (DIN), and syntonic intimacy (SIN) could now be used within a wide range of professional contexts focused upon young adults. For example, therapists, mental health workers, social workers, university educators and researchers, high school teachers, nurses and other medical professionals, and virtually any professional who interacts with young adults would benefit from this reconceptualization in their thinking about their young adult clients.

Replicating findings. Having established the presence of four dimensions through deductive content analysis, a next logical step would be the replication of these findings. While actual replication of these findings is not the goal of a qualitative study (these findings stand alone, as would any other qualitative study), conducting similar and different studies investigating the four dimensions of this study is recommended. Other family science programs that teach intimate relationships courses and use autobiographical narrative (or are willing to include it in their courses) would be an ideal source for replication of these findings. Furthermore, conducting a study with young adults in various contextual settings for the writing of personal narratives in the development of intimate relationships would allow for assessment of these dimensions across contextual settings.

Develop an assessment tool. The development of a self-assessment instrument for use with young adults would be an important next step. Working from the narrative content identified for each of the four dimensions of this study, a self-assessment tool constructed by assigning values (i.e., a Likert Scale) to a range of descriptions for each of the four dimensions could be developed. This would be an important step toward the process to measure these four dimensions with a larger population. With the construction of an assessment tool, additional questions about optimal ranges of each of the four dimensions can better be addressed.

Young adult self-assessment. Once an assessment instrument is developed, professionals may encourage their young adult students, clients, or patients to complete the assessment tool to empower them in understanding themselves and the development

of their intimate relationships. As a therapist, counselor, or youth worker knowing where a young adult stands on psychosocial dimensions of dystonic and syntonic isolation and intimacy would be useful to begin conversations about a young adult's experiences: is s/he happy in a current relationship? How are they dealing with being alone without a desired intimate other? Such an instrument may reveal dystonic isolation or dystonic intimacy and provide an avenue for therapists and other professionals to address these issues or help the young person to begin the work of developing greater levels of syntonic isolation. Helping young adults to gain greater insight into the psychosocial developmental process of this stage (i.e., the presence of the four dimensions and the process to seek adaptive balance) could empower them to be purposeful in their own lives. This has the potential to prevent further dystonic intimacy in relationships as well as to enlighten young adults to healthier choices for themselves and their relationships. Contemporary middle -class young adults in Western cultures are noted to delay or not choose marriage in young adulthood (Cherlin, 2005), therefore understanding individual and romantic intimate relationship development is essential.

Educating adolescents. High school student populations are another possible arena for this view of psychosocial development in the young adulthood stage. This is especially evident given the narratives which described early engagement in romantic intimate relationships while still in adolescence. It was common for young adults to describe a linear path from adolescence to young adulthood full of romantic intimate relationships, each one with dominant features of dystonic isolation and dystonic intimacy. The presence of syntonic isolation and syntonic intimacy seemed to not show

up in student narratives until well into their college years, after experiencing what I consider adaptive balance among the four dimensions of my dissertation. Keeping in mind that the four dimensional model of psychosocial developmental identified in this study is viewed as a typical, adaptive process across young adult development; it is the perspective of this dissertation that most development will occur without intervention. However, given that greater and greater numbers of adolescents appear to be engaging in the development of romantic intimate relationships earlier than the young adulthood stage; it would be worth considering the addition of courses addressing the development of intimate relationships for adolescent high school students. This may be especially true considering that lived experience description in these narratives supports the view that romantic intimate relationships begin early in adolescence. Indeed, Collins and Sroufe (1999) focused their research upon the development of the capacity for intimate relationships in an adolescent sample. Findings from their study outline the epigenetic developmental process of moving from familial relationships to dating to the emergence of romantic intimate relationships in adolescence. Collins and Sroufe (1999) predict a link between adolescent relationship development and love in young adulthood romantic relationships. Addressing the development of romantic intimate relationships for adolescents from the view that encouraging syntonic isolation as an individual will potentially increase the chances of finding and developing a healthy romantic intimate relationship would be an important feature for adolescents.

Foster youth. Extending these findings into the community at large, for example by use with foster youth, has the potential to empower youth prior to emancipation and

exit into the world of young adulthood and possibly better prepared for relationship building. An important consideration about this population is that, while most foster youth will likely have experienced delays in psychosocial development due to abuse, neglect, and family disruption which affect basic trust, autonomy, initiative, and identity, etc. – the desire to love and be loved is a universal experience. Consequently, sexual activity in romantic intimate relationships often leads to early pregnancy for foster youth and is a major health care concern (Dworsky & DeCoursey, 2009). Consequently, the statistics on youth aging out of foster care are gloomy, as many become early parents (Dworsky & DeCoursey, 2009) before they themselves have had the time to grow as individuals and (in the context of this study) explore syntonic isolation and syntonic intimacy. Professionals already skilled in the psychosocial developmental needs and processes for foster youth would benefit from this view of intimate relationship building and could use this model to help prepare their clients for emancipation and ensuing romantic intimate relationships. For example, funding to support these courses could come from the federally funded Independent Living Program (ILP) which emerged from the Consolidated Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act and Title IV-E Social Security Act of 1985 (Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008). The goal of this funding is to support programs that will assist foster youth in obtaining successful transitions to adult life. Understanding the self and intimate relationships with others clearly is an important life skill for youth exiting foster care in the United States.

University level courses. Another potentially impactful use of this model would be for human development and family science professors to include this way of viewing

psychosocial development in young adulthood into their current and future university courses. As the central psychosocial task of young adulthood is the development of intimate relationships, having college and university level educators increase their knowledge of the heavy-lifting involved in this stage by young adults stands to empower both educators and young adults. Educators teaching the development of intimate relationships will benefit by gaining greater understanding of the psychosocial developmental process for their students, thereby increasing empathy and insight for directing students in the personal growth that is so evident during college years. University and college level educators are in an optimal position to help facilitate personal psychosocial development in their students by constructing assignments and pedagogical methods to increase self-knowledge and care in the development of intimate relationships. Introducing this way of viewing psychosocial development will give students tools for better understanding their lived-experiences. The development of intimate relationships is the central psychosocial task of young adulthood and occurs alongside all of the many requirements of young adulthood in the college setting. Often relationship development that is dystonic can be devastating for students and can affect performance in the college setting. As young adults gain insight into the process of the young adulthood stage, and that this development is also happening to others around them, it may help to decrease feelings of being alone (dystonic isolation) and may increase awareness of healthy choices in relationships with others (syntonic intimacy).

Premarital counseling. Premarital counseling is another therapeutic and educational domain where extending this knowledge about the four dimensions may help

couples to explore in-depth, separately and together, where each partner views themselves personally and as a couple. According to Williams, (2014) while only one third of couples seek premarital counseling, these numbers are on the rise. Divorce rates stabilized in the 1980s but current divorce rates continue to hover around 45% (Williams, 2014) this would be an ideal population for the application of this model in that couples participating in premarital counselling tend to be highly motivated to understand how to make their impending marriage be as successful as possible. In similar fashion, the majority of students who attended the intimate relationships course from which these narratives were generated stated that they took the course to both earn college credit and to learn more about the development of intimate relationships for personal growth (Newell, 2012).

Divorced individuals. It stands to reason that as people grow throughout their lives the desire for successful romantic intimate relationships often continues to be a subject of interest. A search of research articles through Google Scholar addressing divorced individuals and remarriage produced 5,720 citations just for 2014-2015 alone. The interest in and motivation to understand the self and others in the development of romantic intimate relationships in not confined to the young adulthood stage. But it is in the young adulthood stage where the psychosocial task to develop intimate relationships is the most salient. It is possible that the findings generated from this study could be used in educational and support/growth producing seminars for individuals who have experienced divorce and are seeking to understand themselves and others prior to and during ensuing romantic intimate relationships.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

As we consider the complexity of contemporary young adulthood, the findings of my dissertation are well timed. It is much more common in the 21st century than in Erikson's time, to interact with numerous romantic others over time (and all the various differences those individuals themselves would bring to each romantic interaction). Gaining a deeper understanding of the demands upon young adults to interact in the social world with romantic others (as seen in the narratives of this study) will help us to better understand this developmental process for young adults.

These findings can be viewed as a window into the lived experiences of young adult college students engaged in the "work" of young adulthood – developing intimate relationships. Just as Piaget (1969) has been attributed with the statement that play is a child's work, so I propose that the development of romantic intimate relationships is the young adult's work. After reading the deeply revealing autobiographical depictions of the development of intimate relationships for these young adults, one can easily see that this is very important work, indeed. This window into the world of the young adult developing romantic intimate relationships was revealing. It showed us the deeply felt world of the young adult, where isolation can feel both good (syntonic) and bad (dystonic), and intimacy: both syntonic and dystonic, as well. A major take-away from student accounts is that it is important for people to develop more capacity for syntonic isolation and to value it because it gives them the foundation to deal better with relationships that have strong dystonic intimacy elements as they encounter various romantic intimate relationships over time.

As young adults gain greater awareness about and recognition of the process to seek adaptive balance within their own lives, they may be more likely to develop and engage in greater numbers of experiences that are syntonic, both alone and with romantic intimate others. The young adulthood stage is a profoundly impactful psychosocial developmental process and one to be deeply respected.

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